

SOCIAL SUPPORTS AND WOMEN WITH FULL-TIME WORK AND PARENTING ROLES: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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Introduction

Description of Area for Study

With the increase in the number of female headed households and the rise in dual career families, the traditional conceptions of family support networks and functions have come under serious question. Mothers who work full time assume major responsibilities in providing for the economic needs of the family system as well as the psychological needs of the family members. Understanding how these mothers develop and use natural social support networks is vital in the development of social welfare services that will build on the strengths of mothers who perform full-time work and parenting role.

The importance of employment to many single and married mothers is critical to the maintenance of a family lifestyle above the poverty level. According to Burden (1986), fifty-one percent of single parent families where the female head does not work are living in poverty and of those where she works full time only seven percent are in poverty conditions. Norton and Glick (1986) reported that two of every three mothers having sole custody of children under the age of 18 years in 1984 were members of the labor force.

Due to the rapid increase in the number of single female heads of households and the number of single and married mothers in the labor force full time, examining how these women perceive social supports in their environment and how these social supports affect their sense of well-being is crucial. This research is concerned with exploring the perceptions of mothers who work full time with regard to their use of social supports in their day to day coping.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study included:

1. What types of social supports, problems and levels of well-being are perceived for coping by women who work and raise children?
2. Is there a difference in the social support perceived for coping on a day to day basis between married working mothers and single working mothers?
3. Is there a difference in the social support perceived for coping on a day to day basis based on the age of the children? or the number of children?
4. Is there a difference in the social support perceived as needed for coping on a day to day basis between women who experienced a high level of negative life events in the past year and women who did not?

Review of the Literature

This research incorporates an ecological perspective and relevant social support theory as the foundation for examining women's perceptions of their social supports and coping.

Ecological Systems Theory

The issue of understanding social contexts as a site for intervention has been the key focus of social work practice. Social workers using an ecological perspective view individuals as evolving and adapting through transactions with their environments. Siporin (1975:509) relates that the ecological model proposes: "People and their physical-social-cultural environment are understood to interact in processes of mutual reciprocity and complementary exchanges of resources through which processes, the systematic functional requirements are met, dynamic equilibrium and exchange balance are attained and dialectical change takes place." Siporin (1975) reports that the emphasis in the ecological model in social work is on the concepts of reciprocal and complementarity of resource exchange and adaptive fit between subsystems of person and situation, of client and milieu.

Germain and Gitterman (1976) note three major problems of living that are the focus of ecological transactions between individuals and their environments: life transitions, using influence in environment and interpersonal obstacles that impede task completion.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) captures the interaction between the individual and the environment in the following definitions:

1. The ecology of human development is the scientific study of progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span between a growing organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded.
2. The ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures each contained within the next.

(p. 514)

How a person perceives their environment impacts on their personal growth, relationship domain and system change orientation. The ecological systems theory perspective is the primary organizing framework from which mothers with work and parenting roles are examined.

Social Support Theory

The importance of the role of social support in the maintenance of an individual's psychological well-being has been generally recognized for many years especially in times of crisis or change [Caplan and Killilea (1976), Dean, Lin and Ensel (1981), Gartner and Riesman (1976), Gottlieb (1981), Hammer, Henderson et al. (1980) Katz and Bender (1976), Makiesky-Barrow and Gutworth (1978) and Mueller (1980)]. Two major conceptual models of the role of social support have been promoted in the literature. These two models (the main effect model and the buffering model) are supported through research but each represents a different process through which social support may affect well-being.

Caplan (1976:200) defines social support as "continuing social aggregates (namely, continuing interactions with another individual, a network, a group, or an organization) that provide individuals with opportunities for feedback about themselves and for validation of their expectations about others, which may offset deficiencies in these communications within the larger community context." Caplan (1974) proposes that social support systems are attachments between individuals and between individuals and groups that promote mastery, offer guidance about the field of relevant forces and provide feedback about behavior that validates identity and fosters improved competence.

Cobb (1976) defines support broadly by identifying four kinds of support (instrumental support, active support, material support and social support). According to Cobb (1976), social support is purely informational and has three components: emotional support, esteem support and network support. Cobb's perspective emphasizes network and mutual obligation concepts.

Tolsdorf (1976:407) defines social support as "any behavior or action that functions to assist the focal person in meeting his or her personal goals or in dealing with the demands of any particular situation."

Social networks is another concept used in the social support theory development process. Caplan (1974:7) describes a support network as "an enduring pattern of continuous or intermittent ties that play a significant part in maintaining the psychological and physical integrity of the individual over time." Weiss (1969,1974) views these networks of relationships as places where a person can obtain a sense of security and psychological reassurance during periods of stress, crisis and change.

This research is concerned with both social support and social network concepts as it affects the cognition, behaviors and the sense of well-being in women who maintain full-time work and parenting roles.

Significant Research on Social Support Theory

The research in the area of social support is still in the beginning stages with both the buffering and main effects model of social support maintaining some level of empirical support. The main effect model of social support postulates that an increase in social support will result in an increase in well-being irrespective of the existing level of support. The buffering model of social support views social support as interfering in the hypothesized causal link between stressful life events and illness at the point of stress appraisal or in response to stress (adaption).

Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) found in examining twelve causal models of social support, life events and depression with their Albany Panel study of households that:

1. Social support has a strong direct and independent (compensating) effect on depression and its change (regression coefficients in the .30s), both contemporaneously and over time. It also serves, to a lesser extent as a mediating factor between prior undesirable life events and change in depression.
2. Strong tie support and instrument-expressive supports are optimal indicators of social support.
(p. 208)

Husaini, Newbrough, Neff and Moore (1982) studied the possible stress-buffering properties of social support and personal competence on depressive symptoms in a group of white married adults from rural settings in Tennessee, Oklahoma and Ohio. The findings indicated that the effects of social support were more pervasive among the females and that personal competence appeared to have a greater buffering effect than the presence of social support alone.

Eckenrode (1983) examined locus of control and help-seeking beliefs variables as they relate to social support mobilization in a sample of women users of a neighborhood health center in Boston. The results supported the idea that internal locus of control and positive beliefs in the benefits of help-seeking each being associated with more support mobilization, independent of the number of potential supporters available.

Hirsch (1980) conducted an exploratory investigation of natural support networks used by women who experienced a major life change. Supports were assessed daily for 14 consecutive days by the subject maintaining a log of interactions. The findings confirmed that helpful support enhances adaption to stress. Low density support systems and multidimensional friendships were significantly associated with better support and mental health for these women.

Turner and Noh (1983) using multiple regression analyses found that social support and personal control are important contributors to the social-class/psychological-distress relationship in women. Parry (1986) examined working class mothers with dependent children and found that employment reduced the risk of mental health problems in women when social support was available.

Several instruments to measure the social support construct have been developed but current instrument development reflects the vagueness in social support definitions and competing conceptualizations of key components of the social support construct.

This research examines social support perceptions using two instruments [Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) and Procidano and Heller (1983)] and defines the social support variable as an independent variable.

Research Method

Research Design

The primary focus of this study is to describe the present status of women with multiple home and work responsibilities and to determine if any differences exist when one compares single employed mothers to married employed mothers with regard to their perceived social supports. A cross-sectional mail survey research design was used to address the research questions. The mail survey procedures followed the total design method developed by Dillman (1978).

Research Sample and Location of Study

A representative sample of women who work full time in daycare/preschool centers was the group selected for the study. This occupational group was selected due to the fact that a higher percentage of women are employed in these centers. The list of early childhood personnel by name was purchased from Market Data Retrieval, a company of the Dunn and Bradstreet Corporation. The list contains over 1,805 daycare centers in Ohio and was the most comprehensive listing available of daycare/preschool personnel. The list was developed by contacting the daycare/preschool centers and asking for a list of employee names and is continuously updated.

This research was limited to a representative sample of daycare/preschool personnel in the Central Ohio region. It included the cities of Columbus, Springfield and Dayton. Three hundred women composed the initial group for the first mailing. One hundred and eighty three women completed the survey. Twenty-six women initially selected were not able to be located and their surveys were returned by the mail service. The completed survey response rate was 67 percent which is higher than initially anticipated due to the length of the survey.

To address the concern of sample bias due to nonresponse the researcher contacted 18 women who did not complete the survey by telephone to determine if they had received the survey as well as what positions they held in their respective settings. The random calls resulted in finding that 9 women (50%) never received the survey due to no longer being employed in the setting where the survey was sent. Of the 9 women who did receive the survey, 11% were directors, 22% childcare teachers and 17% caregivers. It is the assumption of the researcher that those women who responded to the survey represent a typical group of women employed in daycare/preschool settings in Central Ohio.

Variables and Measurements

The independent variables in this research include the variables: environmental demands and social support. The dependent variable is psychological well-being. Individual and family coping are viewed as intervening variables. Marital status, employment status, parenting status, number of children and ages of children are control variables.

Environmental demands referred to stressful life events experienced by the women in the sample population in the last year. The Life Experiences Survey developed by Sarason, Johnson and Seigel (1978) was used to measure this variable. The Life Experiences Survey is a 44 item self report measure that allows respondents to indicate events they have experienced in the past year and permits the respondents to rate the event as positive or negative in their life.

Social support was measured using instruments developed by Procidano and Heller (1983) and Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986). The Procidano and Heller (1983) instrument has two sections, perceived social support from friends and perceived social support from family. The Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) instrument contains 26 items of instrumental and expressive support. The five factors of instrumental and expressive support are: monetary problems, lack of involvement, demand, family problems and unsatisfactory relationships.

The intervening variables, individual and family coping were measured using the Pearlin (1981) mastery scale and by using FACES II developed by Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen and Wilson (1982). The FACES II instrument examines family cohesion and family adaptability from the perspective of the respondent.

The dependent variable, psychological well-being, was operationalized using the Bryant and Veroff (1984) Subjective Mental Health instrument. Using confirmatory factor analysis, Bryant and Veroff (1984) developed a six factor model of subjective mental health. The six factors include unhappiness, lack of gratification, strain, feelings of vulnerability, lack of self confidence and uncertainty.

Findings

The sample population of 183 women who work in daycare/preschool settings in Central Ohio display the following demographic characteristics: 1. approximately 75 percent are married, 2. the mean age of the respondents is 40 years, 3. over 90 percent of the respondents are white, 4. over 50 percent of the respondents completed college, 5. the mean family household size is 3.43 with a mean of 2.47 children per respondent, 6. a majority of the respondents work full time and 7. over 80 percent of the respondents are mothers.

The average number of life events experienced by a respondent is 5.87 in one year. The life event experienced by the most women in the sample is a change in work situation (33%). In terms of the well-being measures, the sample group overall reports satisfaction with their current life situation and sense of self. The social support measures reflected a consistent base of perceived social supports within the sample population.

The t-test of difference was used to analyze if there is a difference in the perceived social support used for coping between married full-time working mothers and single full-time working mothers. A statistically significant difference did exist between married full-time working mothers and single full-time working mothers using the Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) Expressive-Instrumental Social Support instrument. The results can be found on Table 1. The married full-time mothers reported more instrumental-expressive social support than their single mother counterparts.

The t-test of difference was also used to look at part-time working mothers and social support. There was a statistically significant difference between part-time married working mothers and part-time single working mothers using the Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) instrument. The part-time married working mothers reported a higher perceived social support base. The results are located in Table 1.

The t-test of difference demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the total group of single working mothers versus the total group of married working mothers when examining social support as measured by the Procidano and Heller (1983) total instrument as well as the subscale on family support. Once again the married working mothers perceive higher levels of social support from their friends and family than do single working mothers. Table 1 summarizes these results.

Table 1
T-test of Difference Based on
Social Support Measures

Social Support Measure	N	Mean	SD	t-value	significance
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Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986)					
Single Full-time Working mothers	21	81.33	11.24	-2.98	.004 df=58
Married Full-time Working Mothers	68	92.03	15.16		
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Single Part-time Working Mothers	4	72.00	7.30	-3.40	.001 df=58
Married Part-time Working Mothers	56	93.88	12.66		
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Procidano and Heller (1983)					
Single Mothers	25	21.00	5.61	-2.24	.027 df=148
Married Mothers	125	23.67	5.49		
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Family Subscale (1983)					
Single Mothers	23	10.39	4.27	-3.02	.003 df=145
Married Mothers	124	12.74	3.26		

Another question under study was to determine if a difference in perceived social support existed based on whether women had children under the age of 5 years or if they had more than two children. The only statistically significant finding with regard to this question focused on a difference between perceived social support that single full-time working mothers with children under the age of 5 years and married full-time working mothers with children under the age of 5 years reported. The married full-time working mothers with children under the age of 5 years perceived greater levels of social support using the Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) instrument when compared to single full-time working mothers with children under 5 years (t-value= -5.80, significance=.000,df=24.05)

The last difference question focuses on whether perceived social support differs based on whether the woman experienced a high level of self-reported negative life events in the past year or a low number of reported negative life events. When the t-test of difference was performed there was a statistically significant difference between the groups in the measure of social support (t-value= -3.02, significance=.003, df=118) and household income (t-value= -2.33, significance=.022,df=96.31). In both these t-tests, the groups of women who experienced higher self-reported levels of negative events in the past year perceived lower levels of social support and had lower levels of family income in the past year.

The question of how the independent variables of social support and the life events relate to the well-being of these women was explored using stepwise multiple regression analyses. In the stepwise multiple regression analysis the independent variables of social support, negative life events, work status, household income, family size, parenting status, sense of mastery and family adaptability and cohesion were entered with the total well-being measure used as the criterion variable. Table 2 displays the results of the multiple regression analyses. The first stepwise multiple regression analysis used the Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) instrument of social support and the second stepwise multiple regression analysis used the Procidano and Heller (1983) social support measure. The first stepwise multiple regression analysis accounted for more of the variance and appears to be a moderately better fit (Multiple $R=.49246$ and the $R\text{ square}=.24251$).

In the first stepwise multiple regression analysis, social support, mastery and household income explained the observed variance. When examining the beta weights for these three variables they each contributed approximately the same weight in the explaining the observed fit. In the second stepwise procedure, the variable, mastery explained the most variance with a beta weight of $-.24169$. Both multiple regression analyses reject the hypothesis that no linear relationship exists between the dependent variable of well-being and the independent variables. The mastery variable was statistically significant in its contribution to the explanation in both analyses.

Discussion

The results of the t-test of differences shows that there is a significant difference between married working mothers and single working mothers in the area of perceived social support using the Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) instrument and the Procidano and Heller (1983) instrument. This finding supports the works of McLanahan (1983) and Wells, Gladow and Ray (1986). They found that overall, single mothers experience low levels of perceived social support. Single working mothers in this research perceived social support availability and use differently than married working mothers. Married working mothers reported higher levels of perceived social support. Further examination of subscales of the social support measures did not show any significant differences on any one subscale. Therefore this research suggests that in this sample group differences existed in the overall perceptions of social support reported by the women but specific differences may need further study. This overall difference in perceived social support was also noted when changing the women's work status from fulltime to part-time. Although part-time working mothers was a relatively small sample, a significant difference existed between single mothers and married mothers in the area of perceived social support. Again married mothers perceived more support.

The t-test of difference showed no statistically significant differences between single mothers and married mothers based on the number of children they had. The findings were statistically significant when the t-test was used to examine difference in perceived social support between single working mothers and married working mothers when they had children under the age of 5 years. The married working mothers with young children perceived more social support than single working mothers with young children. Married working mothers may not only perceive more social support, but may have more social supports available to them. The demands of a young child may be such that a second adult in the home or older children in the home may increase the amount of perceived social support available to the working mother.

Table 2
Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses with
Well-being as the Dependent Measure

Criterion Variable	R	R2	Beta Weights for Predictors		
			Mastery	Social Support (Lin, Dean and Ensel)	Household Income
Well-being F=11.846	.49246 sign.=.000	.24251	-.299	-.255	-.223

Criterion Variable	R	R2	Beta Weights for Predictors		
			Mastery	Parent Status	Family Adaptability
Well-being F=9.102	.3981 sign.=.000	.15848	-.242	-.191	-.168

The findings in this research suggest that the number of negative life events experienced in one year changes perceived social support. If women experienced a high level of negative life events they perceived social support levels differently than women who did not. Women who experienced high levels of negative life events also showed a difference in income levels when compared to women who experienced low levels of negative life events. One may suggest that issues of income may influence the report of negative life events and increased monetary resources may decrease the impact of the negative life events or the number of negative life events experienced.

The results of the multiple regression analyses projects that the model of social support for future research needs to incorporate mastery as a critical intervening variable. These results further suggest that the effects of environmental demands on a woman's well-being may be mitigated by the individual's perception of their ability to cope. When attempting to understand how women with full-time work and full-time parenting roles maintain a positive sense of well-being one needs examine the mastery construct. The women with a greater sense of mastery may be better prepared to buffer the effects of negative environmental demands than those who had social support alone.

The research is limited in its generalizability to the population of women with multiple work and family roles. The study group did not reflect the ethnic diversity present in the population, therefore further work needs to be done focusing on subgroups within the population. In a cross-sectional mail survey design, the temporal interface between negative life events, social support and well-being is difficult to determine.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This research supports the fact that differences do exist between single working mothers and married working mothers in their perceived levels of social support. The married working mothers in the statistically significant comparisons reported higher perceived levels of social support as well as higher levels of income.

The importance of a woman's feeling of control over her current life situation (the mastery variable) appears to be more critical to her sense of well-being than her perceived level of social support from family and friends or her recent negative life experiences. The implication for human behavior theory centers on the need to further explore the relationship between mastery and sense of well-being.

This research supports the idea that women in different life situations perceive different levels of social support. Perceived social support is context-specific.

The research further suggests that single working mothers may require more assistance in the development of social support systems. Inherent in the concept of social support is the notion of reciprocal relationships and it may be more difficult for single working mothers to enter into an equal exchange with members of their immediate social network due to various demands from their multiple roles. The research allows one to recognize the importance of building an environment that is conducive to the establishment of social supports that enhance a single mother's sense of well-being and coping.

The availability of social supports from family and friends is in a constant state of realignment as social forces mold and shape new realities for women who have multiple home and work responsibilities. This research suggests that high perceived levels of social support allow women to maintain a positive sense of well-being and mastery over their life situations.

For social work practitioners, this research confirms that in the process of coping with everyday tasks supportive relationships with family and friends may mitigate negative health and emotional consequences for women with multiple roles. Married mothers and single mothers do not perceive the same amount of social support in their lives and married mothers perceive more available supports than single mothers.

The high levels of well-being in this study suggest that social work practitioners using an ecological systems framework need to address systemic interventions and not to rely on a traditional individual dysfunction model for interventions. The informal social support network that operates for each woman with multiple roles is important in any psychosocial evaluation. The psychosocial evaluation needs to highlight the woman's perceptions of her informal social support networks. Social workers in work with women who have multiple work and home responsibilities need to strengthen and enhance existing social support systems.

This research supports the importance for social work professionals to develop interventive technologies that facilitate social support growth and maintenance for women with full-time work and parenting responsibilities. The challenge for the social work practitioner is to expand social support systems available in the work and home environments.

The linkage between social work professionals and informal social support networks clearly needs to be further defined. The research findings promote development of preventive interventions with the focus on enhancing social supports for all women with multiple life roles.

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